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ABSTRACT

Based on a review of literature by proponents and opponents of the back to basics movements, the authors contend that the movement will contribute to the continued existence of a stratified society in which the school reproduces existing power relationships. A summary of the literature of proponents presents varying ideas of what constitutes "basics" in terms of curriculum, testing, standards, discipline, school structure, instructional methodology, and parental involvement. However, a broad outline may be described. The child is expected to fit into a school that views successful education as that which helps people fit into the system. The strong emphasis on subject matter is at the expense of social issues that might arouse disagreement among parents. The student accepts authority and the curricular decisions of adults. Opponents see the movement as coercive, ignoring the individuality of the student, uninformed, and culturally biased. Many opponents wish to define basics in their own terms: as flexibility in structuring the school environment, as a liberal education, and as social development. Both groups fail to recognize the crucial nature of family support and the effect on these students lacking the "right" kind of family. Effects of either approach would depend on supportiveness or opposition of the family. Thus, the poorest and most deprived will be excluded from "basics" schools by virtue of their not being the "right" kind of student from the "right" kind of family. (Author/KC)

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THE BACK TO BASICS CURRICULUM as a SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISM

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This study attempted to understand the back to basics movement in its more obvious forms as described by its proponents and detractors and in its less obvious implications as they influence the curriculum and the students. Although the sources reviewed included such diverse publications as U.S.News & World Report, Kappan, Vital Speeches of the Day, and "fugitive" documents in ERIC, there probably are a number of editorials and articles in the local newspapers that could not be identified. However, the body of literature represented here is extensive and varied enough to provide a reasonable guide to the movement.

Defining back to basics is difficult because those who advocate it cannot seem to agree among themselves on its definition. A. Graham Down, the Executive Director of the Council for Basic Education, traces the term to the founding of the Council and defines it to include competent instruction for all except the severely mentally retarded in the fundamental disciplines, especially English, mathematics, history, geography, government, science, foreign languages, and the arts; a high school diploma which represents clear standards, such as the ability to read at the eighth grade level (at least), to write with grace and accuracy, and to have computational skills; the opportunity to develop at an independent pace without waste or duplication of subject matter; vocational training only as a supplement but with high standards there as well; the school's not being responsible for the social functioning of the child; and the use of any methodology that is demonstrably superior to others (e.g., phonics in reading). (21)

Another definition of similar breadth but differing focus defines back to basics in terms of textbooks that are harder to read than those currently in use, tighter discipline, greater control over what television programs kids watch, emphasis upon the three R's (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic), more

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required courses (and fewer electives), competency tests, and greater parental involvement in the schools. (65) A third definition includes regular examinations and letter grades, computational arithmetic, reading drill in "standard phonics," homework daily beginning with kindergarten, strict dress codes, table manners, and detention. (3) But the Council for Basic Education is not for dress codes, religious instruction, corporal punishment, patriotic indoctrination, and McGuffey's Reader. (9)

From these one might reasonably conclude that there is no unity in the movement. However, when one adds to these a host of less comprehensive definitions, one finds a core which can be described in terms of the curricular content of the school; testing, reporting, and standard setting; discipline and the structure of the school; instructional methodologies; and parental involvement in the education of the child. The hypotheses to be tested here are (1) most versions of back to basics serve to increase the importance of the home as the major determinant of the extent to which a child can and will profit from instruction, (2) there is misrecognition of the nature and functional outcomes of the movement, and (3) the covert assumptions of the movement provide a unifying basis for understanding it.

Content of the Curriculum

The content of the back to basics curriculum always includes at least the three R's, called by such names as fundamental skills (17) or disciplines (21), basic studies (17) (22) (27), the essential subjects of middle class America (30) (54), and the traditional curriculum (38); and that content, however supplemented, is to be organized as in some time past. For example, language arts is to be replaced with instruction in reading and with English courses which teach grammar and writing (17) (37). Social studies becomes separate courses in history, geography, and civics (or government) (21) (27). Gone will be those "weighty" discussions best left to the family (27). Instead of space or environmental science, there will be biology, chemistry, and physics. Mathematics becomes computational arithmetic (3) (7) (52) (64).

The curriculum will be further restricted by fewer electives and more required (65) or traditional advanced (37) courses. Physical education, art, music, and health will be minimized (17) or eliminated altogether (27). However, a new emphasis would be given to patriotism (17) (37) (38) (51), "what's right with America" (64), and law and order (17).

Testing, Reporting, and Standard Setting

The return to an earlier and supposedly better era is also apparent in the call for a return to letter grades (3) (7) (17) (43) (sometimes with pluses and minuses (37)), regular examinations (3), required final examinations (17), and the abolition of take-home tests (37). Academic standards are to be "restored" (30) (33) (64), and textbooks that are harder to read are to be used (65). Competency (and passing) are to be determined by minimum competency tests (20 (22) (37) (39) (65), some of which would be standardized tests (17) (43). A high school diploma would represent clear standards (21). Teachers who pass failing students or who make excuses for them are neglecting them (46); a student should be retained until "the light goes on" (2).

Discipline and the Structure of the School

A very important part of back to basics seems to be an emphasis upon appropriate student conduct, including discipline (7) (17) (22) (38) (40) (43) (53) (54) (65) and dress codes (3) (17) (37) (38) (43). Less frequently mentioned were citizenship, obedience to authority and good manners (7), and table manners and detention (3) These well-disciplined students go to a school that has a clearly defined structure. The campus may be closed to outsiders and students may be prohibited from leaving early (17). The emphasis upon authority (11) (17) (54) may even extend to the supervision of parking lots, halls, and other places of possible student transgression (17). Each grade has a specific content which is to be covered therein (43) and students will be tracked and grouped by ability (22). Seemingly at variance with this is the call of one proponent for students to learn at an independent pace without waste or duplication of subject matter (21).

Instructional Methodologies

Students in the back to basics school will be very busy with required homework (3) (17) (22) (37), extensive written exercises (17), and recitation and drill (3) (7) (11) (17). The classroom will be "more" structured (17) and competitive (7), and group-based instruction will largely take the place of independent research and study (17) (37). Teaching will be formal, structured (41), and conventional (38). Student work is to be submitted punctually and returned with a grade (64). Mastery of subject matter will be stressed (21).

Parental Involvement

Parents play a very important part in the back to basics school. Rededicating their homes to learning (7), they should provide an environment

that fosters reading (12) and an atmosphere that promotes good study (17). They should oversee homework, respond immediately to reported problems (17), and in general devote time to school activities (17) (65). They are to be available for conferences when such are requested (43). In general they are to help with both education and discipline (58).

Some functions are shifted from the school to the home. The development of the "whole child" is by right primarily the concern of the home (43). The school is not responsible for the social functioning of the child (21). The most extreme view encountered (27) would make the school responsible for only those things which it can do better than most parents: teach reading, writing and mathematics, foreign languages, history, and science. The home then should deal with "what transpires under the rubric of social studies" through newspapers and dinner table conversation. The same should hold true for moral, cultural, athletic, political, and religious matters. The arts, crafts, music, physical education, and discussions of such weighty matters as racism and sex education should be left to the family.

Summary Definition

Although there is hardly a consensus, the broad outline of back to basics as its proponents intend it emerges. The child is expected to fit into a school that represents the adult wishes of people who have "bought the system," who view their own success or at least that of their children in terms of an education that helps people fit into the system. There are few or no choices open to the student in a curriculum designed by adults to resemble an earlier time in which appropriate school deportment, courses representing discrete disciplines, and drill and recitation were the norm. The strong emphasis upon mastering subject matter is at the expense of social functioning, social issues, and most other things that might arouse disagreement among the parents, assuming that the family has the values, inclination, and capability to assist in substantial and significant ways with the child's education. The support and active assistance of the family is assumed in virtually all the forms of the back to basics movement. The student is that special child who accepts authority and the curricular decisions of adults and who learns in and because of two structured and supportive environments--the school and the home.

Back to Basics: the Detractors

In general those writers who oppose back to basics understand its nature essentially as do its proponents, only they value its features differently. Then tend to dismiss back to basic's efforts to create a school that is free from the wrong-headed innovations (1), the disruptiveness, and low standards of recent decades as simplistic (42) (46), mere nostalgia (15) (40) (48) (37), retrenchment (58) from the complexities of the world (44), and a rejection of innovation (37). Efforts to guide immature minds by a clearly defined and structured curricula and teacher-directed activities (6) are seen as needlessly coercive (61), as ignoring the individuality of the students (6) (24) and the need for understanding (40). The movement is seen as anti-intellectual because it gives an unrealistic view of both the past and the future (15), as uninformed because it does not understand linguistics (19) or media centers (62), and as culturally biased because of its reliance upon standardized tests (41). Its excessively narrow curriculum emphasizes the three R's, allegiance to the flag and the community, and acceptance of authority (34) and pays too little attention to socialization (23). Its patriotic extremism (61) is supplemented by an obsession with "right" answers (15) (55). Others attack back to basics not for what it is but for what it omits--a kind of "me, too" response in which the writer wishes to add his own interest or speciality to the movement (e.g., creativity in composition (8), the affective domain (45), the humanities (13) (26) (28), and semantics and logical skills (5)).

Several writers did not discuss the basics with the same terms at the back to basics proponents but redefined the basics in somewhat general ways. DeTurk argues that flexibility in structuring learning environments, stimulation through examining controversial issues, and group and individual teaching and learning are as basic as the three R's (18). Stipp argues that all should have a liberal education, which is the real basics of the intellectual life (56). Boyer calls for the study of the history of the human race, of how social institutions came to be and where they fit into the broader social context, and of the past, present, and future (10). The basics are defined by van Manen as that knowledge which emancipates the student, teaching him independent thought and enabling him to question the worthwhileness of knowledge for himself (59). Foshay nominates, in addition to the three R's, skills of social interaction, emotional growth, physical and aesthetic awareness, spiritual response, learning to know why, and character or social development (25).

Although the detractors do understand back to basics in terms of its curricular content, its standards and testing procedures, discipline, and the structure of the school, there was almost no mention of methodology (15) (36). We had expected substantial interest in cost control (20) (27) (47) and community control (16), but the literature did not emphasize it.

Misrecognition

However, given the extremely important role of the family in back to basics, the most glaring omission was the failure by both groups to recognize the crucial nature of family support and the probably decisive effect on those students lacking the "right" kind of family. The frequent reporting to parents, homework checking, and parent conferences will have differential effects upon the child whose home is responsive, supportive, and concerned about his education as it is defined in the school as opposed to the child whose home would make living with the arbitrary expressions of authority of the school more difficult to deal with. The further the traditions and requirements of the school are from those of the home, the more arbitrary they seem and the more unrelated to adult life as the child sees it (60). When the whole child is the responsibility of the home, students who come from homes that cannot make up for the school's lack of attention to music, art, socialization, relevant social knowledge and the like obviously are less "whole" than those that come from more supportive environments. But it is not the differential effects that are at issue here, but the failure of both proponents and opponents of back to basics to recognize and deal with the consequences of such a proposal. That is the misrecognition; that is the failure to see the power relations in the school for what they are but only in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder.

Similarly proposals which assume that a voucher of some sort would lead to honoring parental choice and that in turn would lead to increased achievement for most or all children ignore the differential impact of family environment, of the ability to choose wisely and to make up for the deficits of the alternative chosen, and more simply, of the ability to finance transportation to the school of choice for both students and parents. The experience of some poor black children in private schools (9) is cited for support, but again the role of the family is ignored. The family that values education for its children enough to seek out and support a rigorous private school and to spend scarce resources, even when the family is below the poverty level,

for tuition and such cannot be representative of the family that produces children who fail to see the school as an institution ready to help, to assess their progress and deficiencies, to indicate what these mean in terms of the future and to provide that which is necessary for reaching some future goal (32).

Whether the back to basics school exists as an alternative to other kinds of schools or as the only available public school, there will remain a group of the poorest and most deprived who will be excluded therefrom by virtue of their not being the "right" kind of students from the "right" kind of families. This condition will contribute to the continued existence of a stratified society, in which the school reproduces existing power relationships.

Conclusion

Three hypotheses were tested and all seem to have strong support. (1) The back to basics movement does increase the importance of the family because of the support needed to help the student in school and because of the supplemental education which the family must provide which the school does not. (2) There is misrecognition of this fact by both the proponents and opponents of back to basics. The former do not admit the special nature of both children and parents assumed by their proposals, and the latter do not criticize the movement for its differential effects on children from different social and family groups. And (3) this misrecognized assumption does provide a unifying base for understanding the back to basics movement.

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